Aristotle and Democracy

Scott Mann

This paper looks at Aristotle's *Politics* from the perspective of contemporary political, social and economic problems and possibilities. A focus upon Aristotle's defence of slavery highlights the fact that while contemporary liberal political ideas of human rights challenge Aristotelian-type defences of sexism and racism, such ideas fail to address hierarchical and exploitative class-structured political and economic relations — still justified in the same way in which Aristotle justifies slavery. Consideration of the *Politics* is of particular contemporary relevance because of the ways in which it correctly highlights problems of unregulated markets and banking operations, unrestricted pursuit of profit and the dangers of rule by a rich minority, which has reached its apogee today, after four decades of neoliberalism. And because of the ways in which it points towards possible radical democratic reforms in the future.

1. Households

In the *Politics* Aristotle rejects the methodological individualist approach to social understanding represented in his day by Glaucon in the *Republic* — which has been so destructive in the west in recent decades. This is the idea that society is no more than a mass of individual humans, interacting on the basis of pre-determined and generally self-serving psychological tendencies. This has been a central pillar of the neoliberal ideology which has directed policies of privatisation and deregulation since 1980 generating increasing inequality, instability and environmental destruction.

Aristotle sees society as an evolving structure of functionally interdependent social substructures and relations. Humans, as political animals (*Politics* 1253a), are products of the operation of such systems, empowered or disempowered by their positions within such systems, as

well as agents in collectively maintaining, developing and changing social relations.

Amongst contemporary social theorists Roy Bhaskar, in his book *The Possibility of Naturalism*, comes close to Aristotle's conception in developing what he calls a "transformational model of the society/person connection" (Bhaskar, 1979:46). As he says, "society is only present in human action, but human action always expresses and utilises some or other social form. Neither can, however, be identified with, reduced to, explained in terms of, or reconstructed from the other".

Aristotle starts out looking at households as both evolutionary pre-cursers of later state structures and as the productive and reproductive economic foundation of such states. But rather than looking back to the historical development of household structure itself, he argues that the patriarchal structure of such households — in classical Greece, is both produced and justified by facts of nature; specifically the intellectual and moral superiority of free male Greek citizens, as compared to women, children and the captured foreigners who make up the slave work force. Such Greek males have natural powers of deliberation and spirit which equip them to rule over women and non-Greeks, as well as children.

It has been argued that Aristotle's views on patriarchy and slavery are inevitably constrained by the social circumstances of his time and place. But some amongst his contemporaries saw clearly enough that there really were no politically significant intrinsic differences between foreigners, Greek women and Greek men.

Aristotle himself was well aware of the power of social structures and relations in shaping individual character and ability. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* he acknowledges that virtues are not formed by nature but are developed as a result of habit. The telos of the polis is to cultivate the character and quality of its citizens (*Nicomachean Ethics* Book X, ix).

Like Greek women so were slaves engaged in commerce and skilled labour of many kinds, involving plenty of initiative and deliberation. Many slaves were allowed to work independently as craftspeople, alongside of metics and citizens, remitting a percentage of their earnings to their owners. Some slaves, particularly those working in banks, became rich and powerful "controlling and disbursing large sums at their own discretion ... " (Roberts, 2011:73).

Aristotle acknowledges a problem of legal vs natural slaves. Not all legal slaves are natural slaves. But he fails to provide any means to address the problem.

He was well aware of the very different status of citizen women in Sparta as compared to Athens, with some of the former provided with formal education by the state, able to own land, amass wealth, move freely in public spaces and exercise political influence. He argues that the greater power of Spartan women — with two fifths of private land in their possession — undermined the city's defence against Theban attack in 370/69. At the same time, he acknowledges that "in the days of [Spartan] supremacy a great deal was managed by women" (*Politics* 1269b12).

Aristotle speaks of the ruling male household head "handing over to the woman what is fitting that she rule". In spite of their exclusion from the political life of the Athenian state, it looks as if it was women who actively exercised practical control in many areas of the Athenian household at the time, managing the household budget and, in wealthier households, supervising the day to day work of the slaves.

While women, like slaves, could not own property or make legally enforceable undertakings, some of them were involved in running business operations, particularly home-based retail and manufacturing businesses, in C4 BCE Athens (Roberts, 2011:81).

It remains the same today, with most households around the world still patriarchally organised and women still performing the bulk of household labour, and much labour outside the house, under male "direction", with the arrangement enforced by male control of property, other discriminatory legal relations, male violence and internalisation of patriarchal ideology. The necessary social functions are fulfilled by women in spite of the "final authority" claimed by men, with exercise of such final authority undermining or damaging the effective fulfilment of such functions.

2. Prevalence of slavery

In Book One Aristotle writes as if slave labour is an integral part of a free citizen farm. Like Plato in the *Republic*, he thinks that manual labour is fundamentally incompatible with the sort of participatory deliberation involved in non-despotic politics. This seems to be the case not just in the

sense that manual labour takes away time and energy from such participation (*Politics* 1338) but also in the sense that it undermines the operation of the "deliberative faculty". "No man can practice excellence who is living the life of a mechanic or labourer" (*Politics* 1278a).

Many writers have seen universal slave labour on citizen farms as a pre-requisite for Athenian democracy in the sense that it allowed the citizen small holders time to spend away from their farms, participating in public debate in the Council, the Assembly and the Law Courts. But Ellen Meiksins Wood has presented a strong case to the effect that most citizen farms had no such agricultural slave labour and this did not preclude significant participation by large numbers of poorer male citizens in Athenian democracy (Wood, 2015). Only anti-democratic aristocrats and their supporters looked down on manual labour as slavish and incompatible with high level political participation.[1]

Her argument needs to be qualified by reference to patriarchy and to periodic failures of the grain harvest. Aristotle speaks of poorer male citizens using their families as slave labour, to allow them to participate in politics. So too do we need to consider periodic large-scale importation of grain at times of harvest failure paid for with silver from the Laurion mines. This shows the limits to male citizen self-sufficiency.

Nonetheless, the crucial points emphasised by Wood remain valid: (a) that poorer male citizens were engaged in ongoing agricultural labour and did not see this as an obstacle to political participation; and (b) that this derived in part from the relatively equal division of sufficiently productive land holdings without the need to produce a substantial surplus for others claiming land ownership, as in the mediaeval period and around the contemporary world.[2] This allowed citizen farmers to balance some surplus production for trade — against time for meaningful political participation.

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[1] The evidence for Wood's claims comes from various sources. Most important are considerations of the total number of slaves available (Wood, 2015:43–45). She refers also to the legal speeches of Demosthenes, with large numbers of references to slaves, with indications of the work they were involved in, and only a very small number referring to farm work (Wood, 2015:45).

[2] Ober estimates 60 to 65% of productive land owned by 70 to 75% of the male-citizen population (Ober, 2015:103). And Roberts estimates that 75% of citizens owned an average of 25 acres of arable land, with no holdings bigger than 750 acres (Roberts, 2011:69).

Contemporary implications include the vital need for land reform on a huge scale, winding back plantation monocultures in favour of smaller, independent, sustainable organic farms, with genuine equality of the sexes.

As we now know, smaller organic multi-cropping operations can be significantly more productive and very much more healthy and sustainable than the toxic industrial monocultures that have replaced so-called "subsistence" around the world. They can feed the world while providing decent lifestyles for agricultural producers. And, in contrast to, e.g. Marx's scepticism about the level of political consciousness and participation possible for peasant communities, the case of Classical Athens highlights the possibility for highly developed participatory democratic planning in such communities.

3. Corporate hierarchy

While Aristotle-type sexist and racist ideas still function to support patriarchal family structures, and discriminatory practices everywhere, there is increasingly widespread recognition that such ideas have no foundation in fact; and that the overthrow of patriarchal and racist ideas and practices is a crucial moral imperative. The situation is rather different in respect of the division of mental and manual labour outside of the household, and of mass political participation. Here, something close to Athenian slavery remains not only dominant but also largely unchallenged. This is the case over and above the many small businesses around the world which are basically organised as extensions of patriarchal family structure.

Hierarchical corporate structures still control a significant percentage of work beyond the household, with such hierarchy and division of mental and manual labour justified by ideas of productivity gains through specialisation and economies of scale, and of the deliberative superiority of a little elite of decision makers, possessing and exercising special strategic management skills. Supposedly the need to persuade a tiny minority with such special skills to use those skills as corporate managers, coupled with the stress associated with such managerial roles justifies (and requires) payment 500 times that of the shop floor workers.

Basically, Aristotelian arguments are still employed to justify the same sort of master-slave working arrangements as existed in classical Athens,

with corporate capitalist controllers directing the day to day working lives of a majority of employees, and appropriating the products of their labour. The workers, like slaves, are provided with little above basic subsistence, but the rewards of the bosses, and the extent of the power they exercise, have moved massively beyond anything imaginable to Athenian slave owners.

Just as the valuable household work in the patriarchal household is performed by the women in spite of male interference, so do an increasing number of leading economists, including Nobel Prize winner Joseph Stiglitz and ex-US Labor Secretary Robert Reich, now recognise that senior business managers' self-serving activities act to undermine the genuinely valuable contributions of those lower down the corporate hierarchy. Whatever social good is achieved is achieved in spite of the actions of senior managers.

An increasing proportion of those at the top merely concentrate upon further enriching themselves through pressuring or bribing boards and shareholders into voting them ever higher wages, bonuses, stock options, an ever greater share of the surplus. They seek to increase the value of such stock options through boosting short-term share values, through accounting tricks, share buy-backs, mergers and acquisitions, asset stripping and downsizing which undermine long term sustainable growth.

They use profits generated by the workforce to subvert and control the political process in such a way as to increase their own power and reduce that of everyone else; they require policies that maintain significant levels of underemployment to weaken unions and keep workers pay at subsistence level; they avoid taxation through such political control and through use of tax havens and transfer pricing, thereby undermining social welfare provision. They pursue ever greater rent payments through monopoly and oligopoly pricing arrangements, and through below cost acquisition of public assets (privatised public services, property re-zoning, mining leases and subsidies, collusive contracting etc.).

They pump the wealth they have stolen into non-productive investments in already existing assets, thereby generating asset bubbles and producing worsening financial crises, rather than developing new technology and creating new jobs. They campaign to prevent action on climate change and upon increasing concentrations of toxins in the environment.

There is plenty of empirical data refuting the idea of any innate inability on the part of any significant section of any population to participate in

effective economic planning, and the idea that actual ongoing participation in materially productive — or reproductive — labour necessarily undermines the capacity for any such effective participation. There are still over 10,000 employee owned and run businesses in the heartland of corporate capitalism, the USA, while the Mondragon cooperative network is the largest business group in the Basque region of Spain, with more than 150 cooperative enterprises with 60,000 workers (Hannel, 2005:347, 353).

It is true that the legal system and financial markets are heavily biased against worker owned and run business enterprises, and that capitalist markets can penalise worker owners who prioritise human values and social responsibility. Not surprisingly, situations involving the collapse of surrounding corporate capitalist hierarchy have facilitated the creation and effective functioning of worker co-ops. Such worker co-ops refute the idea that deliberation and planning cannot be combined with materially productive labour. This is an issue of justice and of human rights, of fair sharing of rewarding and difficult or unpleasant work, and of the wealth generated, of fair input by all into shaping the conditions of their own work.

4. Markets

Moving beyond individual households, Aristotle devotes Books VIII and IX to highlighting the importance of friendship in uniting the citizenry. Friends "have all things in common". But where there is inequality other things are needed to regulate the relations between individuals, specifically "justice in exchange".

In considering economic relations beyond the individual household, Aristotle speaks of a "natural" equilibrium of self-sufficiency (*Politics* 1257a28). But he also acknowledges a legitimate role for intra-state trade in filling significant gaps in such self sufficiency providing that it is fair trade in the sense of involving exchange of goods of equal value, rather than profit-seeking trade. He only gets as far as recognising money as a measure of such equal value in the *Nicomachean Ethics* but fails to explain what it is that actually leads to particular goods having equal monetary value.

Aristotle identifies those actively involved in seeking profits through unfair exchange as in the grip of a destructive neurosis, or an illusion of the possibility of eternal life — purchasable with such profits. But he

immediately backtracks to a point where unequal exchange is acceptable so long as there is no subterfuge — so long as those losing out are informed and willing participants in the process.

Available evidence shows that Aristotle is factually correct in identifying a high degree of self sufficiency at the level of the free citizen household with small surpluses traded for consumption goods not produced at home. There was, nonetheless, a high level of trade, particularly within and around Athens itself, with lots of small businesses and some larger ones.[3] Aristotle himself describes the passing away of an earlier barter economy and the ubiquity of trade for coins.

At the level of the state and foreign trade, Solon had banned the export of all agricultural goods apart from olive oil, but periodic grain shortages required state supervised import of grain from outside. There was also the slave trade, with 5000 slaves brought into the country per year prior to the Peloponnesian War (according to Roberts, 2011:78).

Along with wine and honey, Athens exported ceramics and other manufactures, and provided services including shipping and prostitution. But so were imports financed by tribute from its Aegean empire. Most significantly, Athenian wealth and power were grounded upon the luck of the silver deposits within its territories. The mines provided a major source of profit not from trade of goods but from the labour of the slaves working the mines. Those leasing the mines hired excess slaves from wealthy citizens and put them to work to create much greater value than their cost.[4]

5. Profit and exploitation today

While plenty of profit is still made from trade today, the great bulk of it derives from labour, as in the Athenian silver mines, along with unrequited depletion of natural capital. In this case, the supposed "free and fair" wage contract conceals the reality of workers, with no real alternatives, generating

[3] By the middle of the fourth century, fruits, flowers, witnesses, lawsuits, water clocks, machinery and many other things could be purchased in the agora. A number of workshops had 20 to 30 craft-workers; including family members, apprentices and slaves. The shield factory of the metic Cephalos employed 120 slaves (Roberts, 2011:79).

[4] Some free citizens were also forced to work as paid labourers particularly on major construction projects and in the navy.

goods to a value much greater than the wage, and the replacement costs of machinery, energy, raw materials etc., which are appropriated by the bosses.

As long as demand for jobs exceeds demand for labour, the capitalist can get away with paying subsistence wages, the minimum necessary to keep the workforce in existence and available for work.

The capitalist business cycle — of boom and slump — along with increasing monopolisation of control of production in key areas ensures ongoing provision of a reserve army of more or less desperate unemployed people. Competition for jobs (along with systematic de-skilling) ensures that wages do not rise much above subsistence for very long or for very many workers, without appropriate government intervention.

J.M. Keynes clearly outlined the social conditions necessary for some of the surplus coming back to those that produce it. This requires appropriate fiscal intervention by state power, spending borrowed money (from the Central Bank) in addition to tax revenues to stimulate the economy in a downturn and maintain full employment. And such interventions need to be complemented by strong (legally supported) trade unions to ensure ongoing wage-led growth.

This, in turn, requires state control of capital and goods moving in and out of its territories to prevent the flow of stimulus funds outside of the state in question and to prevent capital flight in search of cheaper labour and lower taxes elsewhere.[5] Such transfer of surplus requires effectively progressive taxation — of high incomes and profits to support a comprehensive social wage — a welfare system. And boom time re-payment of money borrowed to stimulate growth in the downturn.

Neoliberal policies since 1980 have aimed to maintain a significant level of unemployment (a "natural rate") by raising interest rates as the economy grows, to reduce investment and spending. They have further kept wages down by legal neutralisation of trade unions, by permitting unrestricted export of capital to low wage areas and import of the products of massively abused labour. They have cut the taxes of the rich to sustain asset inflation,

[5] And Keynes highlighted other problems of unrestricted international movement of goods and capital, with significant foreign ownership of strategic resources within a territory seriously threatening democratic sovereignty and national well-being, and uncontrolled trade leading to big surpluses for some and big deficits for others, ultimately leading to breakdown of all trade and the likelihood of warfare.

as an illusion of economic "growth", rather than of the poor and middle class to encourage consumption and investment.[6]

6. Banking; then and now

While Aristotle soon backs down on his rejection of profit seeking through trade and slave labour, he remains seriously hostile to profit achieved through lending at interest.[7] As he says, usury is the "most hated" sort of profit making, with "the greatest reason"; it "makes a gain out of money itself" (*Politics* 1258b).

Banks were quite highly developed in Athens at the time. Starting out as money changers, safeguarding valuables for others, and moving on to providing petty loans in the marketplace, holding objects in pawn for security, such money lenders moved on to larger loans, "risking both their own funds and their customers' deposits". As Roberts says "the most intrepid Athenian bankers also acted as ... intermediaries who connected businessmen needing funds to investors". So it could be that Aristotle was concerned with bankers losing their depositors money through lending large sums for such risky business ventures as long distance trading expeditions (Roberts, 2011:72).[8]

Whatever the basis for Aristotle's hostility to usury, his critique, like his defence of self sufficiency, is very much relevant to contemporary society where the banking system has assumed an ever more dominant and destructive role in neoliberal capitalism. A fundamental difference here is that the state created the money supply in ancient Athens, guaranteeing the value of the silver coins it issued, used to pay juries, rowers in the galleys,

[6] All are supposed to benefit through unrestricted free trade and capital mobility, through comparative advantage in trade and capital flow to most profitable destinations, with job creation and return of increased profits to shareholders. Supposedly free international currency markets ensure continual re-balancing of relative currency values to prevent significant trade imbalances; with the currency of surplus territories appreciating to increase their export costs, and that of surplus territories depreciating to make imports more expensive and exports cheaper. Keynes refuted the idea that free trade guarantees advantages of comparative advantage, and the idea that worsening trade imbalances are automatically corrected by free currency markets back in the 1930s and 40s.

[7] Perhaps he looks back to the widespread debt bondage undermining Athenian society prior to Solon's reforms.

[8] Or perhaps he was thinking of other banking scandals that occurred in ancient Athens (Roberts, 2011:73).

and assembly participants, to finance major public works and grain imports in times of crisis. It stimulated growth and maintained employment, without accumulating debt.

In contemporary society, the banks create money as debt through issuing loans; so do they destroy such funds when the loans are re-paid. This gives unregulated banks huge power to determine the level and the nature of investment. Money creation without investment drives inflation: inadequate money creation — as in a banking crisis — simply shuts down the capitalist economy. Money lent to coal mining corporations undermines the ecosystem of the world, to wealthy buyers of existing assets (of shares and property etc.) pushes up prices, shutting out poorer people from such markets, fuelling booms that ultimately turn into destructive busts. While greedy bankers are encouraged to make loans that run up huge debts, default upon such debts threatens banking crisis and necessitates government rescue with public funds, transferring the debt to the public.

7. Politics

Aristotle identifies three core political functions requiring to be effectively discharged — in any viable state (*Politics* 1297b35). The deliberative element "discusses" everything of common importance, and makes decisions about what is to be done.[9] This broadly corresponds to the legislative power in contemporary political theory. In Athens at the time this function was fulfilled by the Assembly which was the sovereign body of the state with ongoing responsibility for state policy. In theory this was a meeting of all of the male citizens, meeting four times every tenth of the year in the fourth century. Carey estimates a minimum regular attendance of around 5,000, and sometimes over 6,000 attending — over 20% of the male citizenry. Laws could be passed by a majority vote, providing that the matter had been placed on the agenda by the council. At the same time, the Council acted to enforce Assembly decisions. The Assembly could receive and adjudicate accusations of crimes against the state. Any male citizen could address the Assembly following the agenda set by the Council, with Council recommendations accepted, rejected, amended or replaced with alternative proposals put forward by the Assembly (Carey, 2017:66).

[9] Including issues of war and peace, alliances, legislation, imposition of penalties for serious offences, the selection of officials and scrutiny of their conduct.

Aristotle identifies "the executive element" as "the officials", who carry out the orders of the Assembly, who themselves issue orders and make sure that they are obeyed, who are responsible for "regulation of good order" in the state (*Politics* 1299b14). Again, the Athenian situation provided Aristotle's model with the Council of 500 setting the agenda for the Assembly and acting upon its decisions. It co-ordinated with and supervised the activities of other smaller magistracies. In particular, it oversaw state finances, centred upon revenues from taxation (which included a 2% tax on imports and exports and other taxes), rent from the silver mines, and from leased state land and money from the sale of confiscated private property. It oversaw the construction of ships for the navy and had powers of arrest of certain sorts of criminals.

Council members were selected by lot each year, 50 from each tribe. They met daily, with meetings open to the public and — very low — payment for each such daily meeting. Decisions were made by a vote of the members with a show of hands.

Aristotle identifies "the judicial element" by reference to issues of "from whom the members (of courts) are drawn", the "manner of appointment" and the "matters about which they have jurisdiction" (*Politics* 1300b13). He distinguishes eight types of court, dealing with different sorts of issues.[10] The courts were integral to Athenian democracy insofar as the votes of 6,000 jurors, selected by lot from the applicants to serve for a year, determined the outcomes of legal proceedings, and such proceedings had a profound impact on the political process.[11] "Proposals in the Assembly could be challenged in the courts on grounds of illegality" (Carey, 2017:75).

8. Constitutions

Aristotle identifies six different forms of constitution depending upon whether a single one, a few or all of the citizens exercise authority in the three areas, and upon whether they do so purely in their own interests or in the interests of the whole community. Rule of one can be benign monarchy

[10] Scrutinies, offences against the public interest, constitutional matters, disputes about fines, private transactions, homicide, foreigners and minor monetary transactions.

[11] The juries were divided into panels of 100s or 1,000s of individuals. Such panels acted as judges and juries, with an official overseeing proceedings. Matters covered included civil actions, and criminal actions brought by anyone in the public interest, and cases of alleged political misconduct.

or malign despotism, by a few can be benign aristocracy or malign oligarchy, by all can be benign polity or malign democracy.[12]

His ideal state is one in which all male citizens by virtue of their highly developed intellectual and moral powers, are able to effectively and responsibly exercise political power in discharging all three political functions.[13] More specifically, he sees such citizens as ideally fulfilling such political roles in mature middle age, with young adulthood given over to military pursuits and old age to priestly duties.[14] But he recognises that in real states all citizens might not have such highly developed intellectual and moral powers. He also recognises that in such real states political power struggles focus upon conflicts between a rich minority and a poor majority.[15]

Where the former win out, state structures and processes are oligarchical in the sense that the rich exercise power in all three areas, executive, legislative and judicial. Where the latter do so, the poor majority exercise such power through democratic forms of organisation and implementation of the functions in question.

For Aristotle, contemporary Athens was close to his idea of pure democracy, with selection for office by lot, and mass participation, with popular voting in the courts and the legislature. As noted, such selection by lot extended to executive authority, but also included a wide range of public

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[12] Aristotle's discussion is strange to modern sensibilities insofar as he, on occasions, treats the issue of who should rule as one of distributive justice, who deserves to rule, rather than one of human rights, of the democratic right of each to full political participation. At the same time, his teleological approach focuses upon finding arrangements that function effectively to maintain political stability and continuity.

[13] As executive, law makers, judges and jurors.

[14] With only a few able to do this we have aristocracy, with all we have polity. But he also identifies polity with a mix of democracy and oligarchy.

[15] Like Marx, he has a class analysis of politics. As de Ste.Croix points out, "like so many other Greeks, Aristotle regarded a man's economic position as the decisive factor in influencing his behaviour in politics, as in other fields. He never feels he has to argue in favour of this position, which he could simply take for granted, because it was already universally accepted" (de Ste.Croix, 1983:71). Sometimes he applies a trichotomous model which distinguishes those of great wealth — grounded in substantial property ownership — from those of moderate wealth and those of little or no wealth. More often he simply distinguishes a propertied class (*hoi tas ousias echontes*) and those who have little or no property (*hoi aporoi*). Substantial property ownership here crucially includes control of slave labour, and of the surplus product of such labour. The differing interests of rich and poor citizens lead to "civil dissentions and armed conflicts (staseis...kai machai) ... and either the few rich set up a pure oligarchy...or the many poor set up an extreme democracy … " (de Ste.Croix, 1983:72).

offices not involving specific — advanced — skills or abilities. At the local level, of basic geographical/tribal land-holding division, assemblies of citizens were presided over by demarchs selected by lot (Carey, 2017:80).[16]

Aristotle sees problems with both pure oligarchy and pure democracy. As he says, the very rich incline more to arrogance and crime on a large scale than to the exercise of reason in good government. They "neither wish to submit to rule nor understand how to do so" (*Politics*, 1295b13). And tyranny often emerges from oligarchy. On the other hand, the poor are inclined to "wicked ways and petty crime". They are "too subservient" and "do not know how to rule" (*Politics*, 1295b13). They "covet" the possessions of the rich.

He is concerned that the poor, as rulers in a more radical democracy, tend to oppress or abolish the rich and thereby undermine the functioning of a just and effective state. While the rich may indeed be mad profit seekers, and arrogant criminals, so are they likely to be educated, they have the leisure for deliberation, they can afford to pay taxes and — in Athens — provide slaves for the silver mines. Apparently most importantly, only the rich can afford to breed horses for cavalry work, and equip themselves as heavy infantry, which could be crucial to the safety of the inhabitants of a territory suitable for deployment of such forces (*Politics* 1321a5).

Aristotle refers to the democracy of the Assembly tending to undermine long term, stable and principled rule of law by rule of — hastily put together decree. And Plato goes much further in his account of "the democratic man" in *Republic* VII. 55b-569c, in identifying an intrinsic tendency for democracy to transform itself into tyranny. But others have found evidence of stable laws, effectively implemented, changed and developed in orderly fashion. As Carey notes:

> surviving decrees show the Assembly could generate sustained and detailed debate and that it was possible for clerks to follow the proceedings. Not infrequently we find decrees consisting of several segments in which a substantive motion is followed by subsidiary proposals which expand or refine the main motion ... (Carey, 2017:71)

[16] At the national level, officials "comparable to those in modern departments of trading standards" (Carey, 2017:80), sanitary and planning officers, legal officers — including Archons, financial officers receiving and disbursing funds paid to the state, and others were all appointed by lot.

As he says, "this is not chaos ... " (Carey, 2017:71). And the achievements of Athenian society in this period (of the fifth and fourth centuries) testify to the effectiveness of such deep-going, participatory democracy.[17] De Ste.Croix notes that, "the fourth century democracy .of Athens, ... bore little resemblance to [Plato's] unpleasant portrait...and moreover was particularly stable and showed no tendency to transform itself into tyranny" (de Ste.Croix, 1983:70–71).

Aristotle recognised the possibility for mixed state forms with each of the major functions fulfilled by institutions organised in more democratic or more oligarchic fashion. Depending upon the nature of the citizenry, he suggests some such mixed forms as the most effective means of reconciling rich and poor in viable state structures. The idea seems to be that the balancing of pursuit of particular selfish interests can actually lead to governance in the general interest.

9. Against oligarchy

Today we see ample confirmation of Aristotle's critique of pure oligarchy, where states committed only or primarily to the selfish interests of the rich radically fail to support general social welfare.

We do not have to look too deeply beyond the rhetoric of democracy to see that contemporary western societies, particularly since 1980, are basically oligarchic in Aristotelian terms, with executive, legislative and judicial powers subordinated to the interests of big capital, with no meaningful or ongoing participation of the poor majority at any level and no consideration of their interests in law or policy making. The radical failure of such a system is demonstrated by ever increasing inequality, endless vicious warfare, political and financial instability, and accelerating climate change, all threatening survival of human life on the planet.

The domination of the economy by a handful of (arrogant and law-less) corporate executives is the foundation for their domination of the political process. Decades of capitalist development have seen the concentration and centralisation of economic power in the hands of controllers of a small number of massive corporations. Which means concentration of surplus wealth and of job creating and tax-paying powers conferring political

[17] The silver mines were centrally important. But the crucial issue was that of how the silver was used.

control. Such political control has been exercised so as to ensure the passing and enforcement of corporate friendly laws, the takeover of the bodies supposed to regulate the actions of private businesses in the public interest by the businesses concerned, and the concentration of ever greater rent payments in the hands of corporate leaders.

Political structures which ensure the dominance of the political executive play a key role in contemporary western oligarchy. CEOs simply apply appropriate threats and bribes to the leadership of the major parties; promises of jobs, investment, tax revenues, sympathetic media coverage, campaign funding and cushy jobs for retired politicians, for political leaders that support their interests, threats of the removal of all such things for those that do not.

Such more or less direct control has been supplemented in recent decades by the effective ideological subversion of senior public servants, academics and the public at large, led to believe in a narrow range of free market ideas as providing the only viable answers to crucial questions of economic policy.

Such supra national bodies as the WTO, IMF, World Bank, and European Central Bank enter deeply into law and policy making in weaker nation states. The citizens of Greece today are all too well aware of how, as Streek puts it, the ECB, "has developed into the de facto government of the biggest economy on earth, a government entirely shielded from 'pluralist democracy' that acts and can only act as the guardian and guarantor of a [neo] liberal market economy" (Streek, 2016:162).

10. Conclusion

It is saddening to see Aristotle's arguments for patriarchy and slavery still alive today as justifications for patriarchal family structures, sexually discriminatory laws and policies, racial discrimination, and a complete absence of democracy in the workplace. But focus upon the weakness of his arguments nicely highlights the urgency of contemporary reform in all of these areas.

At the same time, while Aristotle's critique of unregulated profit seeking through trade and usury, and of "pure" oligarchy is undeveloped, so does it focus our attention upon the massive problems of such unregulated profit seeking and oligarchy today. The rule of arrogant and lawless corporate executives must be ended before any more damage is done.

Despite his hostility to "pure" democracy, Aristotle's deep investigation of the politics of his day actually highlights the viability and effectiveness of radical Athenian participatory democracy. With the burden of economic exploitation — by landlords or capitalists — removed and without the necessity of slaves working for them, citizen farmers were able to be meaningfully involved in democratic politics.

This meant not only the majority of public offices — including executive offices — filled by random selection from amongst those offering to serve, but also up to 6000 citizens, possibly 25% of the total, regularly attending the Assembly.

It is clearly possible for public offices, including executive offices, to be filled by lot once again. It is clearly possible for a population of 25 million to be divided, by geography or by position within a developed division of labour, into 25,000 such assemblies of 1,000. Each such Assembly could exercise limited local authority and could send recallable delegates to sub-regional assemblies, which, in turn, send delegates to regional, and ultimately a national assembly.

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